

Volume 3, Issue 2

July 2012



Currents in Coaching Research Newsletter

The Coaching/Psychotherapy Boundary: Brick Wall or Picket Fence? (Part 1)

Every once in a while, it's good to change the pattern. So instead of focusing on a single research study in coaching for this column, I'll explore several perspectives on a single issue: the boundary between coaching and psychotherapy. An overview of the issue may initially suggest that the two practices of coaching and psychotherapy are contained within clear and definable boundaries. Recent studies, however, suggest the issue may be more complex.

Theoretically, at least, coaching is limited to clients who are mentally healthy. However, there is a

In This Issue

The Coaching/Psychotherapy
Boundary

Researcher's Haiku

References

Researcher's Haiku

**Cool breeze
enclosed in my
kimono sleeves
till falling asleep.**

(from Chiyo-ni: Woman Haiku
Master. Tuttle Publishing, 1998)

*(Readers are invited to email their
researcher's haiku-original or
otherwise-for inclusion in future issues.
Your feedback on this issue is welcome
too!)*

strong possibility that at some time an individual with a mental disorder will seek coaching. Over 20% of the general population will suffer from some diagnosable mental-health problem at some point in their life and 10% to 15% of the population suffers from some form of personality disorder (Cavanagh, 2005). In this two-part exploration, I will review the relevant competencies, as presented by various professional coaching organizations; examine the findings of some recent studies; and present the key perspectives offered in an on-going dialogue taking place within the British Psychological Society's Special Interest Group in Coaching Psychology[1].

A recent background paper prepared for an upcoming conference on the future of coaching (Campone & Ruth, 2012) offered a comparison of coach competencies as defined by such organizations, including ICF, BPSSIG, the Graduate School Alliance of Executive Coaching, and the Australian Standards for Coaching in Organizations. Apart from alignment with the ICF core competencies, several propose coach competencies relevant to the issue we're exploring. The Australian Standards, for example, recommends that organizational coaches understand transference and countertransference, as well as the features and dynamics of major personality disorders. It is also expected that coaches can work with challenging personalities. The Graduate School Alliance of Executive Coaching Programs and BPSSIG both recommend that graduate coach education include a thorough grounding in core theories of psychodynamics, human change processes, and theories of personality and develop the ability to apply theoretical understanding as a framework for understanding client concerns. The British Psychological Society also recommends that coaches be able to apply an understanding of psychopathology to evaluate and refer as appropriate.

References

Bachkirova, Tatiana (2007) Role of coaching psychology in defining boundaries between counseling and coaching. In Handbook of Coaching Psychology. Stephen Palmer & Alison Whybrow (eds.) 351-366. Routledge. NY: NY

Campone, F. and Ruth, M. (in press). The Voices at the Table: Perspectives on Coaching Practices and the Preparation of Coaches. Background paper prepared for the Summit on the Future of Coaching. July 2012 Charlotte, North Carolina.

Cavanagh, Michael (2005). Mental health issues and challenging clients in executive coaching in Evidence-based coaching: in theory, research and practice from the behavioral sciences. Vol. 1. Michael Cavanagh, Anthony Grant & Travis Kemp (eds.) Australian Academic Press, 21-36

Griffiths, Kerryn & Campbell, Marilyn A. (2008) Semantics or substance? Preliminary evidence in the debate between life coaching and counseling. Coaching: An international journal of theory, research and practice. 1(2) September 2008, 164-175.

Hart, Vicki, Battner, John & Leipsic, Staci (2001). Coaching Versus Therapy: A Perspective. Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research 53 (4), 229-237.

Price, John (2009) The coaching/therapy boundary in organizational coaching. Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice 2(2) September 2009, 135-148.

While these perspectives offer a useful theoretical framework, the challenge remains to operationalize the proposed competencies. The literature offers both theoretical models and survey data which explore questions of client suitability and coach qualifications as well as the constraints of professional standards and ethical concerns. Several studies suggest key aspects of such boundaries without arriving at a definitive answer. Respondents to Hart, Blattner and Leipsic's (2001) study, for example, noted differences in the relationships, the goals and purposes of engagement and underlying assumptions about the client. Studies cited by Griffiths and Campbell (2008) recognize similarities and differences, noting that "the distinctions presented...remain largely unsubstantiated." (p.165) Similarities include some methods such as listening, questioning, a non-judgmental stance and a process of uncovering. Differences include client's focus and intention and the client's baseline from both the client and coach's perspective.

Bachkirova's (2007) discussion of counseling and coaching boundaries points out the challenges of drawing solid boundary lines. These include assumptions about uniformity of process and disagreement about the definitions of coaching. She also discusses the potential fallacies in distinguishing the coaching suitability of clinical and non-clinical populations. She argues "there is a serious ethical issue bound up with identifying people as belonging to a clinical population only on the basis that they have decided to improve the quality of their emotional life with the help of a professional counselor." (p. 353).

If we take these key factors individually- coach, client and engagement characteristics- we can find some results which may help coaches make appropriate judgments. One key area of distinction is the initial motivation of the client or the goal of the coaching engagement. Bachkirova (2007) notes that in counseling, it is "eliminating

psychological problems and dysfunction"; in coaching, the motivation is "enhancing life, improving performance." (p.357) While both interventions have increased well-being as possible goals, client's expectations for coaching include shifting from relative to higher satisfaction, compared with the expectation of counseling to shift from high dissatisfaction to relative satisfaction. In a similar vein, Price (2009) found that a future rather than past orientation is a key differentiator and that the boundary between coaching and therapy is co-created by the coach and client.

The coach characteristics may also come into play. While only 11% of Price's (2009) respondents noted this as a key differentiator, both Cavanagh (2005) and Bachkirova (2007) underscore the importance of a coach's clinical knowledge. Coaches without mental health training may fail to notice subtle signs of mental disorder in their clients (Cavanagh 2005, p.23). He also warns that coaches may cause harm by encouraging depressed clients to set goals which are beyond their current capacity. Comparing the types of coaching goals and processes and measuring these against the knowledge and skill sets of different groups of coaching practitioners, Bachkirova concludes that coaches must be aware of the limitations of their skill set and apply the skills they have appropriately with respect to psychological issues in their practice. These observations align with the recommendations cited at the outset of this article.

Clearly, the coaching/psychotherapy boundary is yet to be defined. In the next issue of this newsletter, I'll share some of the key observations offered in an on-going dialogue within the British Psychological Society's Special Interest Group.

[1] Abbreviated hereafter as BPSSIG

FRANCINE CAMPONE, Ed.D., MCC

*Executive and Personal Coaching
Coach Mentoring, Supervision and
Education*

Denver, Colorado

(303)862-7710

[Visit My Website](#)

[Email Me](#)

[Subscribe To My Newsletter](#)

*Helping mature professionals reinvent life by
reinventing work.*

[Forward email](#)



Try it FREE today.

This email was sent to francine@reinventinglife.net by francine@reinventinglife.net | [Update Profile/Email Address](#) | Instant removal with [SafeUnsubscribe™](#) | [Privacy Policy](#).

F. Campone Coaching | 1150 Vine Street | #902 | Denver | CO | 80206